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# **Trade Union Learning Strategies and Migrant Workers: Policies and Practices in a Neo-Liberal Environment.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines trade union networking and community-oriented activity through the recent development of learning strategies in relation to migrant workers. The paper locates the discussion on learning in relation to union attempts to develop a broader urban and community-based view of the union as an organisation. It assesses the innovative ways trade unions deploy their learning strategies given the challenges associated with a liberal market economy, in particular, in relation to poor levels of co-ordination amongst key social organisations and low levels of state commitment to the area of training. The paper draws on five empirical case studies of such innovative union approaches and concludes that many of these learning initiatives represent a significant intervention by unions in local urban and community-based contexts. However, it also notes that these appear to be disconnected from stable and consistent forms of local communitybased organisation and, in part, remain enveloped in a marketised project-based approach which is piecemeal and in many aspects financially dependent on the state.

## **Introduction**

The question of immigration and labour representation has become a central theme in the study of employment in the United Kingdom. Increases in immigration, rising levels of polemic and xenophobia, the ongoing decline of labour representation at work and the decreasing presence of the labour movement in urban spaces mean that questions of trade union renewal and social inclusion are an increasing focus of study. The development of interest in community unionism, anti-racist strategies and the emergence of equality initiatives has become a feature of such discussions. The argument is that unions need to engage with workers—especially marginalised workers from migrant communities in a more systematic manner and through new strategies. Given the declining workplace presence of unions in the UK, the emphasis has been on new urban and community based approaches to representing the workforce. The area of learning and training represents such a vehicle for engaging with the social and labour market needs of migrants who find themselves relatively excluded due to questions of language and skill formation. In addition, within the UK and the EU, the question of learning has received significant levels of state funding during the past 10–20 years, to the extent that we have witnessed the development of learning centres in workplaces and local communities, a range of training programmes covering a wide variety of content, and a significant cohort of union tutors and project workers.

This paper illustrates how trade unions in the UK use the strategy of learning, external to the workplace, as a key factor in connecting with the broader needs of marginalised communities. Drawing from a range of academic sources and empirical evidence of innovative union approaches, the paper shows how networking through learning requires a multidimensional understanding of the employment relationship and the local spaces within which it is located. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates how various third-sector organisations, including trade unions, have responded with a significant intervention relating to the experiences and needs of migrant workers, particularly in training. The contours of social exclusion and its effect on migrant workers, especially recently arrived migrant workers, are discussed as are the learning and training strategies that are being developed by trade unions to alleviate such hurdles. The ways in which learning strategies are deployed and the problems associated with them are also addressed (Hall and Soskice, 2001), particularly in the context of a liberal market economy with low levels of state commitment to the area of training. The paper engages with these challenges weighing up their contribution and the limitations that exist. The paper concludes that many of these learning initiatives represent a significant intervention by unions in local urban and community-based contexts. However, it argues in the conclusion that there are also problems as these initiatives appear to be disconnected from stable and consistent forms of local community-based organisation. This paper, and empirical research, focuses predominantly on issues affecting ‘newly arrived’ migrant workers, although it is acknowledged that the difficulties they endure may differ from established migrants, for example, second- and third generation migrants. One key difference is the level of fluency in English language. Invariably, however, there are some common shared difficulties and therefore in reviewing the literature these had to be considered and incorporated—where this was the case, however, it has been acknowledged.

## **Migration and the Labour Market**

There are a wide variety of dimensions to the way in which migrant workers can find themselves forced into the most vulnerable parts of the labour market and society. They are often both horizontally and vertically isolated in a labour market position where they cannot effectively deploy their skills, abilities and qualifications (See Martínez Lucio *et al*, 2007 for a discussion). Here, the process of exclusion of migrant labour is identified in four distinct dimensions.

First, their entry into the UK labour market can be highly disorganised and the product of a relatively de-regulated and voluntarist employment system, although this much depends upon when and the way in which migrants arrived in the UK. Whilst workers without a legal working permit are especially disadvantaged, those recently arriving from eastern European accession countries may also find themselves in a considerably disadvantaged position. This is due to the fact that recruitment into low-waged and low-skilled jobs involves an informal dimension that can also be highly disorganised in regulatory terms (Mackenzie and Forde 2009). Indeed, migrant workers face challenges from when they very first enter the UK labour market particularly in terms of ‘socially acceptable

marginalisation' which means that they may find themselves in a mismatch in terms of the jobs they obtain in comparison with their level of skills. Furthermore, often the financial circumstances in which they enter the country, and thus the labour market, mean that they need to accumulate enough financial resources to survive in the first few months, or years. This means that, in many cases, migrants accept work that limits their potential, especially those who migrate out of necessity or without a profession or trade. Therefore, many migrant workers find themselves building up career profiles that downplay their strengths and lock them into a cycle of low-paid jobs and vulnerable employment.

The second dimension of exclusion is that migrant workers are most likely to be employed within low-paid jobs requiring low levels of human capital. The very nature of such jobs means that there is often insufficient support to allow migrant workers to develop themselves or to use the skills and qualifications they already possess from their home countries. This is a reflection of the failure within the UK labour market to effectively recognise and acknowledge skills and qualifications. This is a generic problem but affects newly arrived, low-wage-earning migrants more directly as they do not have the sufficient knowledge of access points to employment to overcome this challenge. Perrett and Martí'nez Lucio (2008) found that those without formal qualifications were least likely to develop through an organisation and were least able to find better employment elsewhere. Such migrant workers are often subject to menial, repetitive and exhausting labour and there is often very little possibility to develop their English as they are often isolated with other migrant workers from their home country.

The third dimension relates to the uneven nature of employment regulation in the UK and means that being paid a basic wage and having 'decent' working conditions is an all-consuming task for many migrants who work in some of the most vulnerable forms of employment. Even those with higher skill levels and competence in the English language are more likely to be employed in such vulnerable roles. The National Minimum Wage Act was first passed in 1998, and implemented in 1999, with the specific aim of providing a minimum standard for the most vulnerable workers. At the time of writing, the national minimum wage was £6.08 for employees aged 21 and over. Most migrant workers interviewed for this study were aware of the presence of a UK national minimum wage, although they had not always received this rate. The image and reality of a minimum figure for a wage were clear to nearly all of the migrants interviewed; however, organisational compliance with the legislation varied and it was not uncommon to use the figure more as a standard benchmark than a minimum, irrespective of the level of skill possessed by the migrant worker. Many also worked long hours and felt that they were not working for organisations which consistently complied with the legislation irrespective of the industry; this research highlighted examples from retail, building, textiles, manufacture and agriculture to name but a few. Yet, because access to trade-union-organised workplaces and trade unions per se was scarce, much depended on 'word of mouth', either in the workplace or outside the workplace within the 'community space'. There were also both direct and indirect forms of racism that further undermined many migrant workers, which reinforced the problems already outlined and created a greater sense of detachment in terms of institutional

affiliation. The challenge related to the nature of employment regulation in the UK (Cumbers, 2005) and the extent to which migrant workers were able to acquire representation and voice in jobs. Hence, the failure and inconsistency of employment regulation impacted heavily on migrant workers. The lack of regulation in respect of employment meant that it was difficult to go beyond a very minimal remit in terms of rights and self-development. The relative weakness of trade unions within industrial sectors that employ migrants clearly exacerbates this problem.

This leads to the fourth dimension of exclusion in respect of mapping social support and being able to use networks and services which may alleviate many economic conditions endured by migrant workers. Martínez Lucio and Perrett (2009b) show that it was common for newer migrant workers to be uncertain of where to access services relating to employment and where to find advice more generally relating to the structures of society and living in the UK. Many turned to their own ethnic communities (see also Perrett and Martínez Lucio, 2006) and networks, although much depended upon which community they belonged to and whether there was a community of fellow nationals to rely on in the relevant locality. However, as this paper will demonstrate, the role of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes was one area where many of the interviewees felt they could actually develop their language skills and gain broader information relevant to their employment status. This clearly raises the importance of social support and networks. It appears then, that the experience of a migrant is in great part related to the extent of information, social support and resources they are able to access, and this seems to be contingent on the presence of pre-established social networks (often outside the workplace). In many cases in this study, there was a sense of detachment unless people were able to turn to local business establishments, religious or political organisations, or social and/or family relations. This sense of social detachment, direct and/or indirect discrimination, having their ethnicity and migrant status linked to their labour market position, and the lack of knowledge relating to support mechanisms resulted in many migrants relying on their own ethnic communities to gain information, services and a sense of dignity or self. This has implications for how they are able to use their experiences and qualifications to map their way into an improved and dignified existence.

To summarise, it is apparent that migrant workers often face negative employment circumstances along the lines of the four dimensions outlined above. These may inhibit the ability of a migrant worker to develop themselves and use their skills and qualifications as part of a process of self-development and enhanced wellbeing. The situation is worse for those workers who do not have the required level of English as they are left to work with even less options and expectations. The four dimension outlined have a direct relationship with learning, skills and general labour market information/communication. These issues have created a major challenge for trade unions and appear to have become disconnected from a large part of new forms of immigration. Moreover, trade unions in the UK have not been in a consistently strong position over the last three decades to influence the learning dimension associated with the issues already outlined. These types of issues have brought forward a range of trade union responses

which have engaged with aspects of personal development, learning and community roles.

### **From the Workplace to the Labour Market: Unions and their engagement with learning**

The question of how traditional social movements have been addressing the social exclusion of migrants needs to be defined in terms of particular aspects of the employment relationship: in this case learning. Trade unions are often, incorrectly, perceived solely as workplace institutions representing only the needs of employees in grievance and disciplinary proceedings (Perrett and Martínez Lucio, 2006). This has serious implications for both the future role and influence of trade unions on a number of dimensions. First, the degree to which unions operate outside of the workplace is important in terms of their profile and accessibility (McBride and Greenwood, 2009). This is particularly important for employees within traditionally hard to organise sectors which raises important questions relating to 'space' and 'community'. The second dimension is intrinsically linked to the first: British trade unions in the past, especially before the 1970s, have been perceived as ambivalent and contradictory with regards to ethnic minority groups per se, and particularly towards newly arrived migrant workers. However, we need to be cautious not to conflate immigration with low-wage jobs. In the UK during the 1950s through to the 1980s, a large proportion of new migrant workers were employed in the public services and in manufacturing jobs which were relatively more unionised and had reasonable working conditions. Hence, trade union regulation in the form of bargaining has positively influenced the terms and conditions of migrant workers during that period and even in the current period when they have been employed in similar sections. Conversely, deindustrialisation, privatisation and the decline of manufacturing sectors, and the apparent inability of the unions to prevent them, have disproportionately affected earlier generations of migrant labour based in those traditional industries (for example, the steel and textiles industries). Significant sections of newly arrived migrants, since the early 1990s, have entered a less-unionised industrial relations system and, in a great part, have worked in low-paid, often contingent and hard to organise sectors. Although it is acknowledged that a significant number of migrant workers have gained employment within the better-paid sectors of health and accounting, this paper focuses on the low-wage and unprotected spectrum. Therefore, such workers are likely to have less exposure to unions: reinforcing the perception of unions as being White British workplace-based organisations even though, since the 1980s, British unions have been highly innovative in terms of equality politics and developing internal voice mechanisms such as Black workers' sections (Wrench, 2000). This leaves migrants, and often minority groups per se, seeking support elsewhere, often through other actors such as the Citizens Advice Bureau (Abbott, 1998a, 1998b) or community based voluntary-sector organisations. However, many of these organisations appear to be distant or disconnected from trade unions (Perrett and Martínez Lucio, 2009).

Despite recent and varied attempts by unions to expand and diversify the roles they undertake, for some, a perception still exists that they are merely workplace-based

organisations, addressing grievance and disciplinary difficulties, or when one requires a 'cheap solicitor'. Yet, structural changes within industry and the changing composition of the labour market have resulted in unions more recently pursuing new approaches to membership in both the workplace and potentially in the community (Wallis et al., 2005; Martinez Lucio and Perrett 2009b). Trade unions have developed 'organising' strategies aimed at developing a new cadre of union organisers and focused on gaining trade union recognition and membership in sites with resistant employers through campaigns, protests and diverse forms of mobilisation (Wills and Simms, 2004). Many of these campaigns target workplaces where migrants are employed, and are inspired by successful and sustained campaigns in the US (see Milkman, 2000). In contrast, given that migrant workers are often employed in sectors with low pay and worse conditions, and thus by employers who exhibit greatest levels of opposition to unions, some trade unions have pursued community-based organising campaigns that transcend the walls of the workplace.

Within this politics of renewal, the learning 'agenda' has become increasingly important. There has been a major shift in the way learning and skill formation has been approached during the past decade. Since the late 1990s, it appears that trade unions have placed an increasing emphasis upon their learning agendas, predominantly within the workplace but also through community projects and learning centres (Stuart, 2007a). The emergence of training and learning as a central plank of government and trade union renewal strategies has attracted the attention of many observers since the late 1990s (Forrester, 2004; Forrester and Payne, 2000; Heyes and Stuart, 1998; Heyes, 2008; Rainbird et al., 2004; Wallis et al., 2005). Within Europe, there has been a similar story with trade unions being seen as a key partner in the new supply-side view of economic regeneration (Stuart, 2007b). Training has been seen as an issue where unions can seek concessions from the state and employers. The debate surrounding the benefits and difficulties associated with trade union and management 'partnership' or 'co-operative' relations is wide and beyond the scope of this paper, as are issues relating to employee participation and social democracy within the workplace. However, the point is that unions have attempted to increase their profile and influence within the workplace through a greater involvement with what can be termed 'non-adversarial' topics whereby both management and unions have a vested interest and are able to work together, in theory, for a mutually beneficial outcome. One such non-adversarial topic is training and learning.

Within the UK, one of the central features of state and trade union policy in the context of the labour market has been the development of lifelong learning and training strategies. The development of the Union Learning Fund and of Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) has become a central feature of trade union renewal. The development of such representatives since 1998 has meant that certain workplaces may employ representatives whose objectives are to consult with management on training needs and respond to calls for information from the workforce on related issues. This has been a central feature of government policy and trade union renewal since the late 1990s. Unionlearn, the learning arm of the TUC, has supported a national network of learning centres. These union learning centres offer a wide variety of courses usually held either in the workplace, local

colleges or union offices. Most participants undertake IT and ‘Skills for Life’ courses; the centres increasingly also provide information, advice and guidance (IAG) services. ESOL courses have also achieved good enrolment figures and can be seen as a positive way in which trade unions can engage with, and offer support to, new migrant workers.

Unionlearn’s initial target was to train 22,000 ULRs by 2010, this target was, in fact achieved a year earlier than anticipated in 2009. Furthermore, a survey of ULRs and their managers (Unionlearn, 2009) found that 35 per cent of ULRs were new to working as a representative for a union; 56 per cent of new representatives were also women; 75 per cent of ULRs report having a positive impact on training; 61 per cent of managers agree that ULRs had helped address skills gaps; and 79 per cent of managers agreed that ULRs had raised awareness of the benefits of training. Such was the importance of this dimension

of union work that the TUC prioritised this in their discussions with the new 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government.

The learning agenda has had the potential to alter the ‘traditional’ image of trade unions and show that they can, and do, improve the working conditions of employees in ways other than simply negotiating over pay and conditions and around grievance issues. Typically the union role in learning is isolated to the workplace, yet through ULRs giving information and advice, arranging training courses and undertaking learning needs analysis sometimes through workplace based learning centres established in conjunction with management, a more dynamic role has been possible for unions according to some perspectives (Wallis et al, 2005). The learning agenda pursued by trade unions also has the potential to extend into the community, raising the question of learning and space. For Forrester (2004), union learning initiatives offer unions the opportunity for fresh partnerships and alliances with external agencies around a common agenda – for example, gender and ethnicity: “... a learning perspective informed by ‘divisions and differences’, for example, provides a more imaginative and politically innovative basis for linking community and workplace audiences around, for example, the recent anti-racist campaigns by the TUC” (2004: 418). Forrester (ibid) believes that such initiatives encourage the reformation of trade unions as “societal actors” rather than workplace partners.

One dimension to this new learning role has been how it has dovetailed with a more community based approach (Stewart et al, 2009). Wills and Simms (2004) view the community dimension and the role of community actors as a fundamental feature of the employment relation that contextualises the experience and approach to work. They also suggest that the scope of traditional trade unionism cannot reach beyond the confines of the workplace due to its institutional and strategic focus, so it must renew along these lines or connect with the community through alliances. Recent work on community-based Worker Centers in the US has shown how migrant workers are becoming integral to their development; the argument is that we need to rethink the way we view these relations in more dynamic ways (Fine 2005). The role of faith-based organisations has also proved important. The recent development regarding the living-wage campaign in London has been greatly influenced by religious organisations in alliance with trade unions (Holgate, 2009). This community dimension highlighted by Wills (2004) illustrates how The East



London Community Organisation project (TELCO) brought together academics, community groups, faith based organisations and some trade unions in a campaign to develop a more social oriented understanding of the living wage. Heery (1998) and Heery et al. (2004) outline the role of coalition building in the logic of trade union renewal in recent years, and this requires – in our view – a discussion and study of more than just trade unions as worker representatives. Moreover, survey evidence (Perrett and Martínez Lucio, 2009) indicates that minority ethnic and specifically migrant community-based voluntary sector organisations actually have a high propensity for working in collaboration with trade unions, especially around antifascist campaigns, employment issues and training and learning, despite the unions’ apparent inability to engage adequately with them. The reality is that the fit between these community approaches and learning strategies is not always so clear. Within this community approach, learning strategies can evolve in terms of their local focus and their inclusion of relatives and residents in specific areas within learning centres and similar spaces. However, much depends on how questions of community strategies link with learning approaches.

Ultimately the learning agenda has been perceived by unions as an opportunity to generate new forms of activism and contribute to increased influence and membership. As a non-adversarial issue - where employers may not see a threat or challenge but benefits in terms of employee development - it has allowed unions to illustrate their mutual value to employers, to extend their influence across the workplace on a day-to-day basis, therefore effectively changing their role within the workplace. It is a viable tool in extending union influence and links with migrant constituencies and community groups. Social inclusion has, in great part, become viewed through the prism of learning. Hence, this paper engages with the question of how learning is used and developed in relation to migrant communities by trade unions and with what institutional risks.

## **Research Methods**

Prior to embarking upon this research paper, a broad project was undertaken by two of the authors, involving a range of research questions focused on union engagement with issues of migration in the UK. This involved a large survey together with 150 interviews with trade unionists and migrant organisations, and identified numerous themes and potential strategies relating to improved relations with and recruitment of migrant labour. One theme which emerged, and one of particular interest to the TUC and labour movement at the time, was the potential impact that innovative learning strategies could have upon migrant workers’ perceptions of trade unions. This formed the back-drop for this particular research project and fieldwork was undertaken between March and September 2007. As the research sought to identify perceptions of trade unions and the deeper impact of their learning agenda as well as potentially complex, sensitive and hidden features of the employment relationship, a detailed, exploratory research technique was required. A case study approach was adopted and senior national and regional officials from a variety of trade unions were asked to give examples of how their union was addressing the training needs of migrant workers—five case studies were undertaken. Where an interviewee did not wish to be recorded, we acknowledged this and anonymity was guaranteed with notes written up accordingly. Interviews were semi-

structured to allow interviewees to speak openly and freely and highlight what issues they felt to be of most importance. Case study 1 was undertaken in a large leather mill and demonstrates a union learning agenda within the workplace. Interviews were conducted with the Deputy General Secretary of the union, two workplace learning representatives, the shop steward, the learning centre manager and a number of, predominantly Iraqi, learners. Case studies 2 and 3 illustrate how unions have offered learning courses, often language-based (ESOL), within either community centres or community-based learning centres. Case 2 was based in a major city in Yorkshire and interviews were conducted with the deputy regional secretary, two regional (roaming) organisers, a Russian and a Polish learner. Case study 3 was based at a community learning centre in east London and interviews were conducted with a cohort of eight Russian and Polish learners and their tutor, as well as the relevant union activists in UCATT. Case studies 4 and 5 are both examples of union strategies designed to link with existing networks within migrant communities. Case study 4 was based in a small town in the north-west of England and interviews were conducted with the GMB regional union official, two Pakistani GMB union organisers and three managers from two community-based projects. Case study 5 was based in a town in the north of England and interviews were conducted with two regional training officials from the union AMICUS, a local activist and a group of Polish workers. These cases raise different issues in terms of the four dimensions of exclusion discussed earlier. For the purpose of this paper, the research and thus the definitions used, exclude groups that were not dissimilar to the indigenous population in terms of ethnicity and language—for example, Australian or American communities in the UK. Although much has been written around union organising and minority ethnic workers, this paper refers predominantly to newly arrived migrant workers (with or without work permits).

### **The Trojan Horse of Learning – approaches and dilemmas**

This section comments on three very different union learning strategies through five case studies and asks to what extent they form a coherent and grounded approach to the issues of exclusion and migration. These five case studies indicate how trade unions' learning strategies vary greatly in terms of their focus. The three strategies presented in this paper also range in their level of complexity; the first strategy (case study 1) illustrates how the use of learning within the workplace allows a more direct link-up with the local migrant community but is premised on a unionised environment and a positive dialogue with employers. In the second strategy (case studies 2 and 3), we see how learning can be linked to issues of basic access and knowledge: the use of local learning centres and community centres as vehicles for offering basic training modules and language courses is a significant feature of union work even if an organic community presence is a challenge. The third and final strategy (case studies 4 and 5) demonstrates how the use of 'like for like' activists and relations with communities is another format for linking through coalitions and more flexible attempts at linking up through learning strategies: the problem. Here is that they are not structurally always linked to the union.

### **Union Learning Strategy 1: Learning in the Workplace as a Tool for Union Organising**

As highlighted earlier in this paper, union organising approaches are varied and in many cases have changed over the past three decades as political support for trade unions and social justice has fluctuated. In some cases, unions have attempted to increase their profile and influence within the workplace by pursuing a greater involvement in issues where both management and employees have a vested interest and therefore can work together for a mutually beneficial outcome. One such area is that of training, particularly in respect of ESOL courses where migrant workers are involved, and especially as trade unions have access to funds for learning that could benefit the employer.

The first case study was located in a large city in the north of England and was a major leather tannery that had witnessed an increase in the number of Iraqi and Polish migrant workers it employed, although the majority of the workforce were White British. The dangerous nature of the work, such as splitting machines and the use of razor-sharp knives, led both management and union officials to express health and safety concerns due to the lack of English language skills possessed by the migrant workers. It was believed that they were less able to understand direction given by supervisors or were unable to read health and safety notices and hence absence due to injury was higher amongst these workers. Trade union intervention by the union 'Community', with management support, led to the introduction of a 13-week ESOL course taught at the workplace. All migrant workers attended the course and, according to the senior shop steward and the training manager, accident levels immediately began to fall and morale and attendance rose, along with the level of communication on the shop floor. Furthermore, all of these employees became trade union members. Later, a Dignity at Work course was introduced for all employees, designed to eradicate bullying in the workplace whereby management and the union identified "an unexpected desire for learning, not only by the migrant workers, but also by many of the White British workers, most of whom had very few academic qualifications". According to the union's Deputy General Secretary, this opened the door to more adventurous workplace learning plans—namely, a permanent workplace-based learning centre. Not only were courses and facilities available to all workers, but the courses were also promoted and attempts were made to remove barriers to participation. Learning representatives were seen as the key link between the shop floor and the learning centre and were viewed as of seminal importance to its success. This was particularly the case in respect of migrant workers who, according to a learning representative, exhibited less understanding of union functions and benefits and required greater levels of support.

Unfortunately, the company closed soon after the research, but this was not the end of the learning centre. However, it did raise serious questions relating to how the success of such an initiative is dependent, not only upon the employer, but also on the state, funding and training providers. With the closure of the company, the union was in the unusual position of having the staff and equipment for a learning centre but nowhere to locate it. After numerous obstacles, and a general lack of assistance from the council, the union moved the learning centre to a sports centre located within a less-affluent part of the inner city. This is an important point, for it highlights how unions can effectively 'export' the

concept of learning beyond the workplace and into the local community to those ‘harder-to-reach’ learners often isolated in the community context, a category that many migrant workers find themselves in. This case illustrates how a union taking a leading role in the learning agenda within the workplace can generate benefits for all concerned— employer, migrant workers and the overall workforce per se—and ultimately this can result in increased union membership. However, it also clearly shows how such an approach is very much dependent upon the acceptance and co-operation of the employer and thus the relationship with the employer. Furthermore, it demonstrates union dependence on a ‘space’, be that within a workplace or externally within the community.

### **Union Learning Strategy 2: Community Learning Centres and Language as First Steps to Inclusion**

A key feature of the second innovative union strategy, illustrated by case studies 2 and 3, is the extension of migrant skills and labour market inclusion through the development of language courses—namely, ESOL courses. Trade unions have been firm advocates of ESOL and these cases illustrate how the new learning agenda has the potential to affect positively both trade unions and local migrant communities. At the heart of many migrants’ approaches to the labour market is learning English, for this is a vital first step to the task of gaining meaningful and well-remunerated employment, as well as networking and social opportunities. In this second case study, a number of trade unions, predominantly Amicus, and a voluntary-sector organisation called the Bradford Information, Asylum and Support Network, began to run an ESOL course at a community centre near to the centre of the town. ESOL was not only utilised as a learning and training method, but also formed the basis for developing other support services and encouraging social networks in the local community. Amicus established itself through being able to focus on individual cases directly at the centre. This helped to expand their influence and further link into local communities. One interviewee, originally from Russia, outlined the benefits she had achieved from attending the course. She explained that her English language had been very weak when she first arrived in Bradford and that the ESOL course not only enabled her steadily to improve her English, but also helped in several other respects. For instance, she used the resources at the centre to learn about her employment rights and raise issues in respect of her employment. Moreover, she used her new skills to assist others who were facing similar obstacles and difficulties. She claimed that she had been supported by Amicus on a range of issues throughout her development. In another example, a Polish migrant, who was initially attending the community centre only for ESOL classes, used the advice and expertise of the trade union to challenge her employer for an improved pay rate. She also stated that she benefited from attending the course and the centre in other ways. First, she identified that being in a new country and not understanding the language could be very lonely and intimidating, and so she appreciated the social element of meeting others in similar circumstances or with similar backgrounds. Secondly, she greatly appreciated access to the Internet and the Polish support services provided by the centre free of charge. What became clear during the course of the research was that the networks between and within migrant communities allowed such centres to develop a

broader supportive attitude. For instance, the centre offered learners facilities in the form of a homework club that allowed them to bring their children to study without distractions and to socialise and practise their language. Many of the participants were progressively building their levels of confidence and seeking support across a range of issues. Furthermore, social networks and friendships emerged across different ethnic boundaries. This was evident through a series of meetings and social gatherings involving Russians, Afghans, Poles and other nationalities. Involvement in such centres not only offers the union greater influence outside the confines of the workplace, but it also raises their profile and represents a direct inroad into migrant communities.

The third case study also illustrates the potential success generated by a trade union physically locating and offering learning (including ESOL) within a community-based learning centre. Case study 3 is concerned with the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians' (UCATT) involvement in a learning centre based at Lewisham College in east London whereby a 10-week ESOL and basic health and safety at work module was established. Interviews with the cohort of eight students, mainly Polish and Russian migrants, and their tutor identified that not only were they benefiting from gaining qualifications in both of these areas, but that they also had developed a strong social and supportive unit. The facility itself became an important point of reference for them, as did the tutor who played a broader role in providing the group with advice and support on a range of matters including National Insurance payments and other administrative tasks such as car tax and MOTs, registering for benefits or with a doctor. Furthermore, when it was identified that there was a paucity of IT skills among the cohort of learners, the module tutor trained the students in basic IT skills, to develop their ability to use a variety of programmes and better utilise the Internet to address their support needs. Following the 10-week course, the majority of students embarked upon advanced health and safety modules through the UCATT centre, subsequently developing a level of expertise and qualifications that enabled the majority to take on formal health and safety roles, a few at managerial level. What is more, these students have served as a link into various local communities and a number of them were willing to become union mentors to other migrant workers within the industry. Such links now extend to progressive private sector employment agencies that have used the UCATT learning centre for training and that have as their objective the recognition and effective utilisation of migrant skills and qualifications. Therefore, a clear network based around learning centres, local colleges, trade unions and employment agencies has begun to combine around this ESOL learning facility. The benefits for migrant workers generated through ESOL courses and community/learner centres in these two cases were not simply concerned with language skills, but also clearly acted as a point of reference that allowed for a sense of belonging, personal improvement, socialising, support and well-being across communities and ethnicities. The physical space of the centres and the unions' presence in that space acted as potential catalysts for other support developments that empower migrants and facilitates social inclusion. It is also a means by which trade unions can expand their engagement with migrant communities through a new learning agenda.

### **Union Learning Strategy 3: The Union Case for Diversity—Engaging with the Potential Membership**

Increasingly, it has been realised by many within the labour movement that trade unions need to extend their influence and focus beyond the confines of the workplace into the community in respect of their learning agenda. However, unlike case studies 2 and 3, some unions have realised that they might not be the best placed to deliver learning, or to offer information and support to migrant communities. They have instead recognised that the best way to raise their profile within minority communities is to work alongside, or employ the services of, existing community groups or influential individuals. Case studies 4 and 5 illustrate two such innovative initiatives.

Case study 4 relates specifically to a community-based learning strategy adopted by the GMB in a small town near Manchester. GMB local officials had realised that, for numerous historical reasons, they lacked influence and profile, and thus membership, within this predominantly Pakistani and British Pakistani area. This meant that they were not very prominent, among many actors offering support to the community, and therefore the success of their community project around learning was dependent upon building links and trust within the locality. Their strategy was based around officials from the local union branch working specifically with Pakistani trade unionists who had lived and worked in the town since migrating to the UK. As is often the case with those who actively participate in social movements, these individuals were also engaged in voluntary and paid activities around social justice, regeneration, community events and improving their local communities. Hence, they were well known throughout the community and had developed extensive personal networks through face-to-face contact, the mosques and the local council. The GMB initially sought to develop a new community campaign in the town area, focused around anti-fascist activities given the growing influence of the British National Party (BNP) in the area, and subsequently to raise the profile of the union, further to engage the community and to extend their learning agenda. Key Pakistani GMB activists were identified as ideal project workers to lead the campaign. The anti-fascist campaigns received considerable media coverage and support from the council and community alike and succeeded in raising the profile of the union within the community. Building upon this success, the learning agenda was extended into various communities across Manchester's suburbs, as the GMB applied for government grants and union learning funds for computers and other resources for learning centres across the city. Moreover, the profile of the union was further raised through the numerous activities in which the Pakistani GMB activists were engaged. For example, they acquired a list of voluntary-sector support groups from Manchester's Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) and personally wrote to them all, offering them, and the communities they represented, free employment advice from the union. Through personal contacts, they developed and nurtured a relationship between the GMB and a well established, influential, not-for-profit community support and advice centre in the heart of the town. Part grant-funded, part commercially funded, this organisation ran a variety of short-term community projects, provided advice and information to the community covering issues such as housing, migration and benefits; it advised other voluntary groups on bid writing and ran a resource library. The target of this strategy was both newly arrived and already established migrants. The GMB's contribution

came in the form of funds for an advanced learning centre with 10 computers. Where the union had, in the past, been viewed as yet another ‘White organisation’ offering assistance at a price to a predominantly Asian community, they were now viewed with less suspicion as they had become legitimised through their involvement with identifiable individuals within specific communities.

The final case study, case study 5, was located in a different city within the north of England. The regional training official and local activists for Amicus had identified a growing number of Polish workers occupying jobs within less-skilled, unrecognised and traditionally hard to organise sectors within the city. The union official believed that in this instance the best way to recruit, represent and provide a service for these workers was through pursuing a community approach. The union official’s early attempts to organise within the community by handing out leaflets and organising small one-off advice events were described as “completely unsuccessful”—a common problem for many unions in the past, caused by not fully understanding the communities they were trying to engage with and a failure to develop sensibilities in terms of community dynamics (McBride and Greenwood, 2009). However, this gap in community-specific knowledge began to improve as local officials developed a relationship with two English-speaking Polish colleagues. These colleagues advised the union training official that the vast majority of Polish workers attended one of the city’s three Polish Catholic Churches and advised that, if the union wanted to advertise an advice and information drop-in event within the community, it might be best to do it through the Church. The union training official set a date for a ‘drop-in’ evening, designed flyers advertising the event and had them translated into Polish and attended the ‘club/bar’ located next to one of the Polish Catholic Churches with his Polish colleagues to seek permission to advertise the event. A chance encounter and discussion with the priest resulted in him giving his support and taking more than 500 flyers. The official described this as “pure luck”, for which he was grateful. The drop-in event was held within the community at a nearby union-run resource centre. Representatives from the union were present, as were Polish-speaking advisers and translators. Furthermore, a number of other organisations including the Citizens Advice Bureau, local housing trusts, solicitors and careers advisors had stalls at the event. Also, specific advice useful to new migrants to the city was offered—for example, how to register children at school, how to register with a doctor, how to get an MOT for a car, how to open a bank account, access to housing, immigration forms and benefit issues, the minimum wage and workplace health and safety, advice and guidance on writing and structuring CVs, how to vote in locals elections and how to campaign against the BNP. This event allowed the union to raise its profile within the Polish community and to communicate more effectively its function and the services it provides, not only concerning traditional issues of pay and grievance in the workplace. It provided a face, and also a space, for the union and allowed the community to meet the officials and spend time in their premises which happened to be a union resource/learning centre. This illustrated their accessibility as well as their involvement in providing training. This event subsequently developed into a broader approach with open meetings and cultural evenings held at the resource centre, which extended the link between unions, local bodies and

migrant communities. The growing popularity of these events, as the union became more trusted, allowed the passing of information, access to social services and support between workers. One group of Polish workers explained that they were able to find out more about the minimum wage through such events and felt more able to gather information about their rights on a more systematic basis. There was also growing positive evidence of more Polish workers seeking information from the resource centre and enrolling on training courses.

## **Conclusion and Discussion of Issues: Learning in a Decentralised Environment**

Trade unions in the UK have been proactive in searching for ways to link with new and established migrant communities and improving their social and employment needs. The development of basic skills courses and language skills courses, among others, has been seen to forge a link between the union's non-traditional workplace role and new constituents of workers. The use of community centres, union workplace branches and spaces, and links through activists and external organisations are features of this learning-based approach to union renewal in terms of representation. The three strategies presented in this paper are union responses designed to address different types of employment exclusion. These responses deal with issues of basic skills and their development and investment in language skills: both of which are vital to operate in an employment context at a minimally effective level. Furthermore, vital information about the labour market and employment legislation is another way trade unions have provided support to migrant workers by ensuring a degree of advocacy and support in certain cases. There is also a noticeable increase in the way trade unions have engaged with employment networks and the sharing of information about problems emerging from specific workplaces and local labour markets. These have enabled unions to use links with migrant communities as a basis for collating insights into bad employers and unregulated workplaces, although many feel that much more is required of unions with respect to this particular set of activities. More specifically, the cases presented provide an interesting portfolio of union innovation in what is generally seen as an unsupportive regulatory climate. The first case study pointed to how such learning strategies can be located within the workplace and can address broader health and safety and representational issues at work. UK unions have become relatively innovative in strategic terms in respect of how to connect to a more disorganised and 'hidden' workforce in terms of regulation. In some instances, trade unions have tried to address broader needs and developmental aspects of the migrant workforce. This is particularly highlighted in case studies 4 and 5 in relation to the involvement of community and learning centres. However, there were challenges in all of these cases: setting up structure points within communities where migrants were typically located was uncommon and, where present, proved to be challenging. The declining union presence within workplaces, weaker regulation and a lack of consistent social networking and coalitions with migrant groups have made innovative developments like those outlined in this paper rare in the UK.

The cases reveal some significant features of the way that learning strategies, as a



response to social exclusion in relation to migration, have been mediated and developed by trade unions in the UK. The role of learning has been seen as a major vehicle for engagement with migrants, dovetailing with the way unions have used learning and education as a vehicle of renewal more generally, but in a way that creates a reliance on state funding and a servicing approach to unionism (McIlroy, 2008). However, within each case there was an absence of clear structures in terms of these dimensions that have had major repercussions on the effectiveness of union strategies regarding social inclusion. Four key issues can be identified which were common to most of the cases.

First, trade unions have approached this question of learning and migration in a context of weak regulation. Whilst we can see learning departments develop in unions, with substantial investment when compared with other initiatives, the problem is the way work in this area is organised around particular externally funded projects. The initiatives are driven by, and often require, a focus on a range of clear competitive funding streams which do not always coalesce or relate to each other in a systematic manner. This tends to lead to major problems in how learning projects are linked together, strategically tied to local union work and, in turn, linked to workers more generally. What is more, the knowledge and organisational skills required to deal with such organisational processes can create an elite of individuals within and around the unions who are the arbiters of links with the funders and learning community.

Secondly, the level of funding, in terms of learning, increased during the Labour government of 1997–2010; however, this was still towards the lower end of European averages for learning and was never able seriously to counter the low-skills culture of the UK in general terms (Keep and Payne, 2005). In fact, the dependence on the state for such funding meant that there was a political cost to such engagement in terms of what funds could be used for what. The tendency was to prioritise minimal approaches to skills and learning. Inclusion was reduced to basic levels of skills and not long-term mentoring and support—and a more systematic engagement with questions of careers, qualifications and employment support was rarely funded. The strategies and services were in many cases ad hoc and tended to be less similar, for example, case studies 2 and 3 identified a more systematic and spatially focused view to networking and local alliance building in the relevant cities. This is a major challenge in spatial terms as the main ‘alliance’ is between funders and service deliverers.

Thirdly, the role of the local state in such initiatives is also variable. One could argue that the ability of local trade union structures to link with the local state on such initiatives has been limited due to the market of service providers and the competitive element it contains. This has meant that unions and community groups may compete for limited funds. What is more, trade union structures in British cities as a whole have declined, leaving individual unions to negotiate and develop their strategies in a variety of uncoordinated ways. Hence, one begins to see that the socialising of servicing in terms of learning and its extension to other areas of workplace and employment issues has been low.

Fourthly, the question of the relative absence of a consistent community approach and politics, and a serious question of local spatial strategies in terms of the presence of community-facing offices in each locality, is salient. Similarly the absence of a community/territorial structure at the local-area level and the absence of key links within local community groups may isolate and weaken learning initiatives as a vehicle for social inclusion. This gap, which is widely acknowledged in much of the literature (Wills and Simms, 2004; Holgate, 2009), can be measured in terms of the way unions have to develop local initiatives, as in the cases highlighted here, even without a clear institutional framework in community terms (see McBride and Greenwood, 2009, for further discussions). There is an absence of a community discourse that locates different coalition partners in terms of inclusion strategies: although in key sectors such as steel, shipbuilding and mining, there was such a presence through a range of cultural and political institutions within the community (McBride, 2006), but currently this is less the case. There is also a lack of local community union structures that are externally facing and not just linked to the union's internal structures or membership. Furthermore, although it is apparent that certain unions are making real efforts to engage with different communities, learning support structures have, and are, being developed independently from unions. In fact, some might argue that unions are relative 'late comers' in this area and thus are seen as disconnected from the community.

In effect, the question of learning and inclusion is subject to a marketised logic which can emphasise a fragmented approach based on minimal inclusion and rights. It is not designed consciously and deliberately in this manner, but is the outcome of a desire to transfer regulation and the role of social support to the market. In this case, the absence of an urban and spatial discourse within British trade unions and the absence of stable and community-based structures exacerbate the manner in which the learning and servicing of migrant needs are fragmented and marketised. In terms of the four dimensions of exclusion we referenced earlier, such a learning-based strategy does not tackle the core problem of the initial point of entry into the labour market for migrants, nor does it have any major relevance to and influence on the nature of the jobs done by migrants, given the lack of employer engagement (Stuart, 2007b). Regulation in terms of work is not advanced or strong enough to allow unions and social groups to support consistent learning and training initiatives.

Finally, the lack of trade union links with networks and community bodies within migrant communities, irrespective of a small number of high-profile cases, means that such strategies of learning are disconnected and not tied to spatial or community dynamics. Yet, British unions have within such exceptional circumstances attempted to 'glue' together an approach to inclusion through learning which has led to an internal set of debates and sensitivities which are in the main becoming more robust in the context of a crisis and state cutbacks since 2010. Attempts at re-engaging communities and localities in the context of a neo-liberal assault may link and fuse learning strategies into a more rights-driven and locally active approach. If the state is the point of risk in the agendas discussed here, they may also be their point of radicalisation.

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